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Short Assignment 6

PHIL2054, Emotion in the Arts

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When Korsmeyer discusses the paradox of aversion, she is primarily interested in the paradox of disgust (at least in the “The Magnetism of Disgust”). Her ideas about the acquisition of insight as a solution to the paradox of disgust also solve the paradox of tragedy, the other component of the paradox of aversion. Because of this, Korsmeyer’s arguments regarding the paradox of disgust also solve the complete paradox of aversion.

Korsmeyer discusses the insight obtained from disgusting works of art in the section Aesthetic Cognition. According to Korsmeyer, there are many different experiences playing out simultaneously when we experience a disgusting artwork. Among the most likely contenders are amusement, erotic arousal, and sensual pleasure (as opposed to pleasure from learning), and learning. The former experiences are all powerful experiences, and may overshadow the insights being acquired from learning. The pleasure we experience from disgust is tied to this insight, or learning. The insight, according to Korsmeyer, is seldom complex or awe-inspiring. The themes of disgusting artworks could be as simple as “We are all mortal.” As Korsmeyer points out, these kinds of ideas are not revolutionary. In order to truly experience the full impact of such an insight, it must be delivered in a medium such as an artwork (a disgusting one, in this case). We are absorbed by the art even though it is disgusting, because we gain this insight in such a powerful manner. Korsmeyer describes pleasure as an intense absorption in one thing, which we wish to continue rather than stop. When we are thus absorbed, we therefore appreciate the aversive aspects of disgusting artwork and take pleasure in it at the same time. I can therefore realize that a disgusting artwork is aversive and take pleasure in it at the same time, overcoming the paradox of aversion.

Lamarque discusses the paradox of tragedy. His arguments can also be extended to the paradox of disgust, and his solution could therefore also be extended to cover the entire paradox of aversion. Lamarque accepts that there is normally some sort of moral that can be obtained from a work of tragedy. He does not believe though, that the insight obtained from this moral justifies indulging in a work of tragedy. After all, we can obtain the same moral from one of Aesop’s Fables, or it could be blankly stated to us, without the need for the unpleasantry of tragedy. To overcome this hurdle, Lamarque introduces three different dimension inherent to a work of tragedy. These are the fictive, literary, and moral dimensions. The fictive dimension is the actual fiction that we become emotionally invested with in the tragedy. The literary dimension is the actual structure of the literature. The moral dimension is the afore-mentioned moral or insight of the story. Lamarque notes that these dimensions “are not interchangeable, not co-extensional and not reducible one to the other.” The three dimensions all rely on each other, and it is our appreciation of all of them that allows us to enjoy a work of tragedy. For example, the unpleasant part of tragedy is normally found in the fictive dimension of an artwork. But we can recognize the excellence of the literary and moral dimensions, which allows us to appreciate the fictive dimension as well. This is what allows tragedy to be desirable and overcomes the paradox of tragedy.

Lamarque’s argument is convincing, while Korsmeyer’s is not. Both solutions suggest that there is something unique about the way tragedy and disgust convey their insight that makes them desirable. Lamarque breaks down the aversive artwork into its different components, and analyzes these in a rational manner. The reader can easily identify with Lamarque’s solution, because the three dimensions he identifies are readily observable by a reader of a work of tragedy. Korsmeyer, on the other hand, tries to tell us that the way we are absorbed in the artwork is actually pleasure, and therefore the paradox of aversion is overcome. Korsmeyer’s definition of pleasure is not well defended, and without it, her solution fails. There are many things that I can be absorbed in, which I do not find pleasure in, such as menial or mechanical tasks. Conversely, I can take pleasure in things that I am not absorbed in, such as good weather. If absorption does not equal pleasure, then the absorption we experience while experiencing an aversive artwork is not necessarily the pleasure that allows us to overcome the paradox of aversion.